Wildfire Policy in Transition: Where There's Smoke, There's …. Mirrors

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James E. Hubbard, State Forester, Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado State University,

Fort Collins, CO, 80523-5060

Policy-making is a reflection of the public's perceived need for change. For much of the 20th century, wildfire policy in the United States was "all fires out by 10 A.M." This policy was instituted in 1935, but evolved out of "The Big Blowup," a firestorm that swept the Northern Rockies in the summer of 1910. During this catastrophic event, five million acres burned (three million in Montana and Idaho alone) and 78 firefighters were killed. "As Elers Koch [an early Forest Service official] blandly understated 'The 1910 forest fires in the Northern Rocky Mountains Region is an episode which has had much to do with the shaping of fire policy not only in that region but the whole United States.'" (Pyne 1982) Public values driving the policy were fear of a timber famine in the wake of the 1910 and consecutive fires, the conservation movement, and a view of forest fires as the moral equivalent of war to be fought in a paramilitary manner.

By the late 1950s, the concepts that managed fire use can be an effective tool and that fire is essential to the growth and regeneration of healthy forests began to take root. But these concepts were not adopted by government agencies until the early 1970s when the "let burn" policy was instituted for national parks and wilderness areas. The policy was also known as "Prescribed Natural Fire."

In 1988, the Yellowstone fires brought much attention to ecosystems that were out of balance with what was considered "natural" or pre-settlement conditions. This particular event underlined the fact that fire-adapted ecosystems regularly require fire. The 1988 Yellowstone Fires emphasized the need for more scientific analysis of ecosystem dynamics.

The public's perception was that Yellowstone was being destroyed and there was animosity toward the Park Service's "let-burn" policy. However, three congressional hearings were held and the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture appointed a committee to evaluate fire management policies for national parks and wilderness areas. (Franke 2000) Their report, issued in May 1989, upheld the need for fire in maintaining a wildland ecosystem, but criticized several aspects of the National Park Service's fire management plans, finding that agency budgets and training were inadequate. (Franke 2000)

For a little over a decade, wildfire policy has been in transition. The most significant policy changes were made after the 1994 fire season, during which 34 firefighters died, including 14 in the South Canyon Fire. The tragedies raised the concern that the potential for catastrophic wildfires was increasing beyond the nation's response capability. (National Academy of Public Administration 2001)

In 1995 the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture for the first time issued a joint fire management policy to ensure that federal land management agencies would have compatible, coordinated programs. The 1995 Fire Policy acknowledged the role of fire in healthy forests and in reducing the risk of large-scale wildfire: "Wildland fire will be used to protect, maintain, and enhance resources and, as nearly as possible, be allowed to function in its natural ecological role." [Frank 2000]

In effect, the new policy established a second mission for wildland fire managers – to improve ecosystem health and reduce fire hazards. This added mission is very different from the traditional firefighting mission. (National Academy of Public Administration 2001)

The fires of 2000 in Montana brought attention to the threat to life and property. This season was one of 6 since 1988 that burned more than 5 million acres. Fire suppression costs were at their highest ever, at 1.6 billion. Yet the 2000 fire season may be the most significant of all, because it became the

focal point for our discussions of the role of fire on our public landscapes, as well as rethinking policies for forest and rangeland management. (Freemuth et al 2001)

The 2000 fire season was pivotal in the development of the National Fire Plan, a long-term, multifaceted strategy designed to manage the impacts of wildland fire to communities and ecosystems, and to reduce wildfire risk. The plan encompasses the Departments of Agriculture (Forest Service) and Interior (National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs). The strategy focuses on five areas: 1) improving fire preparedness; 2) restoring and rehabilitating burned areas; 3) reducing hazardous fuels (with an emphasis on multi-jurisdictional efforts to give better landscape-scale protection); 4) assisting communities; and, 5) research. Accountability and collaboration on a local level are stressed. (National Fire Plan)

Also in 2000, the General Accounting Office released a report which found that fuel build up was a major problem in the West and recommended that the Forest Service develop a cohesive strategy to reduce fuel build-up. The strategy establishes a framework to restore and maintain ecosystem health in fire-adapted ecosystems in the west and focuses on "short-interval" fire-adapted ecosystems where lower intensity ground fires frequently occurred and were a powerful force in shaping the make-up and structure of vegetative communities. Three condition classes were defined for the risk condition of short-interval fire adapted areas:

> *Condition Class 1* – lowest risk of destructive wildfires, closest to natural conditions, where fire intensities are low and generally ecologically beneficial
>
> *Condition Class 2* – where vegetation is denser because several cycles of fire have been missed and natural "thinning effects" of fire have been lost and where there is a higher risk of destructive wildfires due to increased fuel load.

Condition Class 3 – where many fire cycles have been missed, where there is much dead and downed material and many small trees. These areas are at the highest risk for intense and catastrophic wildfires.

The strategy identified high priority areas for treatment: the wildland urban interface, municipal watersheds, threatened and endangered species habitat; and maintenance of treated areas. (USDA Forest Service Cohesive Strategy)

In August of 2001, a 10-year comprehensive strategy was developed to guide management of wildfire, hazardous fuels and ecosystem restoration. This was done in collaboration with governors and in consultation with a broad range of stakeholders. The scope includes federal, state, tribal, and private lands. The core principles of the strategy are collaboration, priority setting and accountability. (10-Year Comprehensive Strategy)

In 2002, western drought combined with forest conditions produced further evidence of extreme fire behavior. West-wide, more than 6.4 million acres were burned and thousands of structures lost. Costs incurred for suppression exceeded $1.4 billion. Nearly 40,000 firefighters were mobilized to battle blazes all summer long.

The drought ushered in an unusually early fire season for the west. The fires began in New Mexico on March 23rd, when a two-day, wind-driven event contributed to the destruction of a number of homes in southern New Mexico, near Ruidoso. The Rocky Mountain Area experienced fire activity, including high elevation fires, four to five weeks earlier than normal due to persistent drought conditions along with a spring snow pack of only 20 to 40 percent of normal. The nation went to Preparedness Level 5 (the highest level) on June 21, and remained there through mid-August. The nation set a new record for

the number of days at Preparedness Level 5 – a total of 62 days. (National Interagency Coordination Center)

The evacuation of more than 81,000 Coloradans from their homes and communities highlighted the increasing exposure of wildland urban interface areas to loss of life and property from wildfire. This exposure prompted the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to issue emergency declarations on 17 Colorado fires. (The previous record for FEMA fires was three and occurred during the 2000 fire season.)

In 2002 a presidential initiative called the Healthy Forest Initiative (HFI) was released. This initiative was designed to facilitate projects that reduce wildfire hazard and risk by making decisions in a more timely and efficient manner. Emphasizing collaborative processes to identify projects and priorities, the administrative proposal seeks to increase the use of Categorical Exclusions for fuel reduction projects; looks for ways to streamline the appeals process within the existing appeals framework; and, seeks to streamline the Environmental Assessment documentation process. (Healthy Forest Initiative)

And so where does fire policy in the United States rest now?

In the early 1900s, the public's perception evolved to one of "all fire is bad" and so policy was created to put suppress all fires. This policy led to a nation of forests and ecosystems that were out of balance with their biological imperative: forests were overly dense, unhealthy, vulnerable to insect and disease epidemics, and excessively fire-prone.

Gradually, it became apparent through scientific study that our ecosystems were out of balance and that, in order to restore ecosystem health, fire must be reintroduced. It took many years for public perception to evolve into one of "some fire is good" and for policy to be adopted reflecting this attitude.

Today's public is asking why we are experiencing such extreme fire behavior on such a large scale threatening life and property. They believe that something should be done and, increasingly, the something is to manage the forest. Beyond the "smoke" recognition, comes the "mirrors." What to do, where to do it and how management treatments are implemented continues to fuel debate and controversy.

Do we treat only around homes in the forest or to subdivision boundaries or into forest? Do we take only the small material or restore to pre-settlement conditions with openings and fewer trees? Do we leave some fire regimes as they are and let nature take its course? Should natural resource managers expedite action or take a more deliberative approach? What about land use requirements and personal responsibility?

Two U.S. Presidents and their cabinet secretaries responsible for natural resources, the Western Governors, and Congress have all made this issue a priority. Never has so much attention been give to wildfire in America. Leadership has set the stage. Action is expected and the citizens are aware that our Western Forests are in trouble. Reminders through large fire events will continue.

How do we move beyond the smoke and mirrors? The time for solutions is now. Through a collaborative process, in a landscape context, prioritized treatments to reduce risk and restore ecosystems must occur. It's time for all concerned to agree on principles that guide land management actions, and implement the planned actions. We have the evidence to make reasonable decisions.

Problem solved? Almost. Policy in transition also takes time. Collaboration isn't easy. Relationships, adjusted for new thinking, with the resolve to moved forward, have to be developed. With the issue of wildfire, time isn't on our side. Bold steps are necessary, tempered by respect for all involved.

National and State leadership has done their part. It’s time for professional land managers, stakeholders, and citizens to act.

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